

E - Equality

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Equality is one of the key social values in the modern world. It featured prominently in the foreign policy of the former USSR and great importance is attached to it in post-Soviet Russia as well. Equality as a principle, value and purpose is mentioned in all of Russia's fundamental documents —from the Constitution to concepts and strategies. But what are the real manifestations of equality in interstate relations?

Over the past two thousand years, the idea of equality has undergone complex evolution in Euro-Christian culture and this evolution is still far from complete. The equality of people as an act and result of creation; their equality before God; equality among themselves as a consequence of the former and the latter; equality regardless of their social status, rank, occupation, or income ... All these interpretations of equality apply only to interpersonal relations.

The question of whether the idea of equality applies to people of different faiths has always been resolved negatively within the framework of religious consciousness. However, this question brought the idea of equality to the social level. Secular life required law, and with law there emerged the need to establish criteria of equality (or absence and denial thereof). This approach opened up a fundamental possibility (which did not

always materialize) of recognizing the equality of people even in a multi-confessional environment. The class approach (Marx was not the one who invented it) finally moved the problems of equality and equal rights to the level of mass social phenomena and processes.

But upon closer examination, the relationship between the church and the secular authorities, of the latter between themselves, between the government and the people, and of social groups and classes remained essentially interpersonal. The rebellious slaves and peasants, the Reformation, revolutionaries in France of the 18th century, and in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century and all social movements of the past invariably fought with a personalized adversary in the first place and only after that and less often with institutions and rules.

The Westphalian system of international relations, colonialism and the spread of capitalism throughout the world propelled the problem of equality to the level of interstate relations. The Peace of Westphalia specifically stipulated that its provisions did not apply to Muslims and the Islamic countries. European international law of the late 19th and early 20th centuries divided all countries into civilized (Western Christian), semi-civilized (among them countries of Orthodox Christianity) and uncivilized (all others). Moreover, while wars between the former were considered impermissible, the use of force in relation to the latter was considered acceptable, and towards the third group as occasionally necessary¹. The problem of equality swept through the rapidly developing realm of inter-institutional relations.

Wars and revolutions in the first half of the 20th century fused three levels of equality and equal rights—interpersonal, macro-social, and institutional (including interstate)—into one indissoluble knot with many inherent contradictions.

Equality has come to the fore. It implies the existence of a legal system—the only possible environment where rights can be determined. In interstate relations, the role of such a system is played by international law, which is essentially a complex and internally contradictory set of intergovernmental agreements. This means that whenever serious changes

¹ See: Franz von Liszt. *International law. Systematically Presented (Das Völkerrecht systematisch dargestellt)*, 1st ed. Berlin, 1888; 11th ed. Berlin, 1918

occur in the most significant states and/or international order, the international legal system derived from them can also change and most likely will. At the same time, political mentality in different parts of the world can continue to be driven by the inertia of past ideas, standards and norms for a long time.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and a number of subsequent international documents specified the current understanding of these rights. The UN Charter, the Vienna Convention of 1961, and a number of other well-known documents performed a similar function in relation to the sovereignty of states and their political equality. The source of destabilization remains at the macrosocial level, where there exist such vague phenomena and concepts as “peoples’ rights” (Who and by what criteria is recognized as “the people”? Do peoples have not only rights, but also obligations, and if so, then in relation to whom? Can peoples be punished for non-compliance with their duties, and if so, by whom, on what basis and how?) or as “minority rights” (Who are “minorities”? In relation to whom? In what territory?).

Globalization poses an objective question: Will the institution of the state be embedded in some kind of supranational system—financial, religious, ideological, or other—or, on the contrary, will the states themselves (or some of them) determine its political, economic and cultural content? To answer this question, the political-legal and sociopolitical status of a state in the international system is of particular importance.

But in which particular system? For the United States, firmly convinced of its “victory” in the Cold War, it is an American-centric world order (its toughest version) or Western-centric (a softer one). Russia, as a country that “lost” the Cold War, is obliged to integrate into this order on the West’s conditions—which is logical, in a sense. However, for Russia, China and a number of other states, the international system of the 2000s is a transitional one from U.S.-centricity to polycentricity. Will such a transition take place or will something unexpected occur is anyone’s guess. But from both Western and non-Western, including Russian, points of view, the world is in a state of transition, which means that the clear-cut criteria of the order, rights, status of states and their real (not just political and legal) equality

or lack thereof have been violated. Moreover, their erosion continues, while new criteria are nowhere in sight yet.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia was recognized in the world as its continuation, but not successor. In the 1990s, this made it possible to successfully solve tactical tasks, first of all, to retain the seat of a permanent member of the UN Security Council and membership in other international organizations, and solve issues concerning Soviet property abroad and a number of others. Quite naturally, the long-term costs of such a decision are becoming ever more noticeable: by all standards, Russia is de facto a different state, and not a continuation of the USSR. As a different state, Russia is the main winner in the Cold War—without its efforts the Soviet Union would not have collapsed. In this regard its claims to a significant role in the world and to equal relations with the United States and the West as a whole are more than well-founded. As a successor state, it is merely a loser in the Cold War and, from the point of view of the West, is seeking revenge and striving to change the world order that is comfortable for the West.

The transitional nature of the modern international system raises another question: equality with whom and how? It is unlikely that Russia needs equal “rights” with the Americans to intervene, stage “color revolutions,” replace unwanted regimes or carry out other such actions. Of course, the logic of international processes may in some cases force Russia to act in a similar way. But in the long run, Russia does not need equal rights with the United States or anyone else in pursuing an imperial policy. It has to coerce the United States into equality with other states. But of course, Russia cannot do this alone.

The problem of equality has a political and psychological side to it. As an idea and value, equality can be a powerful source of motivation and an effective tool for building a safer and fairer world. But, like any other idea and value, equality under certain circumstances can turn into its opposite. And then the desire to level everyone with all others in all respects can, at best, result in the loss of common sense, and at worst, produce a mixture spiced with historically inherited phobias and complexes, leading one to feel “always offended” and/or empowered to deny equality or even rights in general to a certain state or social groups.

It is better to be prepared for such turns amid fundamental global transformations. The assertion of ideas of equality and equal rights has never been a smooth and continuous process. Each step along this path was dictated by the practice of glaring inequality and injustice preceding it. The extent to which common sense and responsible rational consciousness can replace this role of hard and often tragic experience remains to be seen. In any case, equality, including that in relations between states, is a situation that cannot be established once and for all. Maintaining it will require continuous and focused efforts.